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# THE FOUNDATIONS OF A NATIONAL DRAMA.\*

BY HENRY ARTHUR JONES.

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It would be generally agreed among educated persons, I suppose, that the measure of a people's advance in the fine arts is the measure of their distance from the brutes; that in reality art is not merely auxiliary to civilization, but may also be claimed to be civilization itself. Ruskin says, "Life without art is mere brutality." Even religion itself becomes a crude and hideous thing the moment it is separated from art. I need not affirm the value and importance of the fine arts generally, or show how little dignity, or beauty, or refinement, or even humanity, can belong to the nation that rejects them. In England to-day, the arts of painting, music, sculpture and architecture get a very scanty and grudging recognition from Government; the drama gets no recognition whatever. Now, I do not wish to put the drama into competition or comparison with the other arts, or to claim for it any preeminence over them. In any cultivated and well-organized society, all the arts should have their due and separate spheres of influence, and all should meet with equal marks of national recognition and esteem.

But I hope I shall be justified in saying that no other art is so intimately and vitally concerned with the daily national life as is the drama. No other art so nearly touches and shapes conduct and practice. No other art can so swiftly move our thoughts and feelings, or stir our passions, or inspire and direct our actions. In sheer momentum, in vitality of impulse, in present and penetrating power and persuasion, all the other arts are dead and imaginary things, "as idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean," compared with the drama. If we wish to inspire our millions of

\* This article is based upon a lecture prepared for and delivered at the Royal Institution of England.

English-speaking citizens with enthusiasm for great national ideals; if we wish to persuade them to care for the things that are more excellent, for the things of the intellect and the spirit; if we wish to sweeten their manners, to refine their tastes, to create, in their lives, a daily beauty instead of a daily ugliness, what instrument could be so swiftly and surely operative to these ends as a wisely conceived, wisely regulated and wisely encouraged national drama? In the widest and truest sense I claim that, in a closely packed democracy, the drama is and must be an increasingly powerful teacher, either of bad manners or good manners, of bad literature or good literature, of bad habits or good habits. Potentially, it is the cheapest, the easiest, the most winning, the most powerful teacher of that great science which it so much concerns every one of us to know thoroughly—the science of wise living.

Consider for a moment the millions of people living sedentary, monotonous lives. The great majority of them have toiled during the day at desks, in factories, in shops, and warehouses, and offices, at some mere routine task, which, instead of quickening the powers of their minds, has rather clogged and deadened them. Now the dreary routine of the day is over, and these millions have gone forth to search for relaxation and amusement. I will ask you to enlarge the spaces of imagery in your minds until they contain seating capacity for hundreds of thousands of persons, perhaps millions. Try to conceive all the vast audiences at a particular moment assembled in all the theatres and music-halls of the English-speaking world. Summon them all before you. Multiply row after row, tier above tier, crowd upon crowd, listening, watching, laughing, weeping, hushed, applauding; here, catching a moment of responsive rapture from some heroic sentiment; there, grinning and chuckling at some half-veiled indecency; here, tasting the fine flavor of a choice Shakespearian passage; there, working themselves into a frenzy of vicarious valour by the cheapest jingo bluster; here, melting and sobbing over some scene of domestic pathos; there rolling and roaring over some piece of stale buffoonery; here, mystified and awed by the tricks of the scene-shifter; there, startled and impressed by some searchlight flash into the human heart; here, peeping and leering at a ballet-girl's skirts; there, watching some vivid sketch of character; here, being stupefied, imbruted, coarsened and vulgarized; there, being charmed exhilarated, humanized, vitalized.

Again for a moment survey these myriads of amusement-seekers; catch the echoes of their "innumerable laughter"; the whirlwinds of their applause; put your finger on these millions of beating pulses. Consider how enormous, how far-reaching, how operative, not only upon manners, but upon conduct and character, must be the effect upon them of what occupies their evening hours of leisure. For the great majority of them the hours of the day are dull and lifeless with mechanical, uninspiring labor. It is only in these two or three evening hours that nine-tenths of our population can be said to live at all. Surely, it is a matter of supreme importance in the national economy whether a nation has a drama or no; whether it is fostered, organized and honored; or whether it is neglected, disorganized and despised.

For myself, outside the great permanent concerns of government—the defence of the country; the guarding of the national finances; the enforcement of law—outside a few such great matters, I cannot see what question has more intrinsic importance, or could so fittingly engage the attention of legislators. I will beg leave then to affirm, on behalf of these myriads of amusement-seekers, that it is desirable to have a national English drama and a national American drama; wisely regulated, wisely encouraged, thoroughly organized, suitably housed, recognized and honored as one of the fine arts.

Perhaps it will be advisable to inquire what a national drama is or should be, what it should do for the people. Clearly, the first function of drama is to represent life and character by means of a story in action; its second and higher function is to interpret life by the same means. But the first and fundamental purpose of the drama is to represent life.

If this sounds like a platitude, I will ask how many plays at the present moment on the English-speaking stage are representing life, or even pretending to do so? How many theatregoers trouble to ask themselves whether they are seeing a picture of life? How many theatregoers judge the play and the dramatist by that simple test? I will ask further, "Do nine out of ten of the present generation of English or American theatregoers look upon the theatres as anything but a funny place where funny people do funny things, intermixed with songs and dances, and where they are to be amused on the lowest intellectual level?"

If playgoers will carefully listen to the remarks and judgments

upon plays that come within their ear-shot during the next few months—even from cultivated men and women—I think that they will come to the conclusion that the playgoing public have for the most part lost all sense that the drama is the art of representing life, and that there is a keen and high pleasure to be got out of it on that level. By the representation of life I do not mean that the drama should copy the crude actualities of the street and the home. Very often the highest truths of life and character cannot be brought into a realistic scheme. The drama must always remain, like sculpture, a highly conventional art; and its greatest achievements will always be wrought under wide and large and astounding conventions. Shakespeare's plays are not untrue to life because they do not perpetually phonograph the actual conversations of actual persons. In the past, the greatest examples of drama have been set in frankly poetic, fantastic and unrealistic schemes. But whether a play is poetic, realistic or fantastic, its first purpose should be the representation of life, and the implicit enforcement of the great plain simple truths of life. Realistically, or poetically, or fantastically, it should show you the lives and characters of men and women; and it should do this by means of a carefully chosen, carefully planned and always moving story.

Now, let us take a glance at the London theatres and see what is being done there. They are fairly indicative of what is going on all over England. Gradually, during the last dozen years—gradually, but ever more boldly and more successfully—the greater number of the fashionable theatres of London have disassociated themselves from any attempts to present a picture of English life, or of life of any kind; and have given an entertainment more and more approaching to a series of music-hall sketches, songs and dances, threaded together by no rational, or plausible or possible story. The same dozen years have seen the bankruptcy of the leading Shakespearian theatre, and the dissolution of the aims and ambitions and hopes connected with it. At one or two other theatres there have been very beautiful and, one is delighted to say, fairly successful Shakespearian and poetic productions. But these Shakespearian productions have been mainly successful by reason of their pictorial elements; not mainly on account of their acting, or their poetry. The manager who, at great cost, with immense pains and research, puts on a play of Shakespeare, takes his managerial life in his hands. He thinks himself lucky if he

can run it for a hundred nights and get back his expenses; while his neighbor, who puts up the latest piece of musical tomfoolery and buffoonery, is sure of the immense and cordial support of the public, of enormous and universal good-will, and of a prosperous run of many hundred nights.

Turning to the drama of modern English life, we meet with corresponding tendencies and tastes on the part of the playgoing public. Here I must use some reserve, lest I be accused of making this a personal matter. First, let me gratefully acknowledge the immense favors I have received at the hands of the American and English playgoers. Next, let me disclaim that I speak with any sense of present soreness or disappointment. It is by the continued grace and favor of American and English playgoers, it is by virtue of the rewards and recognition they have bestowed upon me, that I am able to speak quite frankly and fearlessly on this subject. Disclaiming, then, any personal soreness and disappointment, I will say that I think we may all, playgoers, actors, critics, authors, feel great disappointment and very great apprehension on account of the present prospects of the modern English-speaking drama.

Ten years ago, we seemed to be advancing towards a serious drama of English life; we began to gather round us a public who came to the theatre prepared to judge a modern play by a higher standard than the number of jokes, tricks, antics and songs it contained. To-day the English dramatist, who pays his countrymen the compliment of writing a play in which he attempts to paint their daily life for them in a serious straightforward way, finds that he is not generally judged upon this ground at all; he is not generally judged and rewarded according to his ability to paint life and character; he is generally judged according to his ability to amuse the audiences without troubling them to think. And I believe that this tendency on the part of the English playgoers to demand mere titbits of amusement, and to reject all study of life and character in the theatre, has largely increased during the past ten years, and is still increasing. Insomuch we may say that the legitimate purpose of the drama—which is to paint life and character and passion—is to-day lost sight of in the demand for mere thoughtless entertainment, whose one purpose is, not to show the people their lives, but to provide them with a means of escape from their lives. That is to say, the pur-

pose of the entertainments provided in our most successful theatres is, indeed, the very opposite to the legitimate purpose of the drama, the very negation and suffocation of any serious or thoughtful drama whatever.

I do not say that one or two of us may not get in an occasional success of a hundred and fifty nights with a comedy, or even with a play of serious interest, if by a miraculous chance one can get it suitably played. But any play of great serious interest, such as would meet with instant and great recognition and reward in France or Germany, is most likely to be condemned and censured by the mass of English playgoers as "unpleasant." I am aware that it is useless to condemn a man for not paying to be bored or disgusted. But the fact that he is bored and disgusted raises the further question: "Why is he bored and disgusted?"

I question whether any subject has recently gathered around it such a thick fungus of cant and ignorance as that of the "problem play." For a number of years past the parrot-phrase, "problem play," has been applied to almost every play that attempts to paint sincerely any great passion, any great reality of human life. No doubt, great extravagances and absurdities were committed by the swarm of foolish doctrinaire playwrights who tried to imitate Ibsen. But the stream of just contempt that was poured upon these absurdities has run over its bounds, and has almost swamped all sincere and serious play-writing in England.

I was talking to a comfortable English matron some little time back. "Oh, I hope we sha'n't have any more of those dreadful problem plays!" she exclaimed. "I like a nice pretty love-story, where everything ends happily." I could not help inquiring: "My dear lady, have you ever read your Bible?" A day or two after that, I met a middle-aged man in a club, a member of one of our oldest families. "I don't like these problem plays," he said; "I like legs!" Now, these were representative playgoers, and they resented that the theatre should be used for its legitimate purpose of representing life. And, so far as one can judge, this feeling has been largely spreading amongst playgoers during late years, and is still gaining ground.

Now I do not decry popular entertainment. We may cordially recognize that nearly all our American and English theatres are well conducted and are clean and sanitary. There is scarcely a suburban theatre in London or New York that in its interior

arrangements does not put to shame the leading Paris theatres. Further, we may cordially recognize that, if most of the entertainments might more fittingly be described as "tomfoolery" than as "drama," yet a good deal of it is very excellent tomfoolery, and for the most part quite harmless. Some of it is, indeed, very ignoble, and one can frequently detect little witless and smirking indecencies and allusions. And these ribaldries seem to me far more degrading, far more poisonous to morality, than the broadest, frankest Rabelaisian mirth, or than that bold and fearless handling of the darker side of human nature which is so loudly reviled in realistic plays.

But, on the whole, it may be very cordially recognized that, granted it be the chief business of the English-speaking theatre to supply the public with bright and clever tomfoolery, then we may own that the theatres are doing their duty. I say there is a very considerable alloy of very ignoble stuff, and a great deal of funny business which strikes one as very dreary and mirthless. I have never been able to understand why a "funny" man is less of a nuisance on the stage than he would be in a drawing-room. Let us hope that the day is not far distant when the "funny" man will be esteemed as great a nuisance in the theatre as he is in ordinary life. But many of the artists who appear in these musical pieces have an alertness and vivacity, a way of sending their lines home, a power of keeping their audiences awake, which one rarely finds amongst our ordinary actors. And this is, doubtless, one of the causes of the comparative neglect of our spoken drama.

Meantime, let me again disclaim any feeling of anger or jealousy against popular amusement in itself. It is one of the first necessities of those who lead monotonous lives that they should be amused. But the point I wish to make is this: Popular amusement is not the art of the drama; it provides an entirely different and lower pleasure from that given by the drama. Yet the drama is hopelessly confused in the public mind with popular amusement, and has to compete with popular amusement by sinking its own legitimate aims and ambitions. The drama, which is the art of representing life, is not judged from that standpoint at all; it lives a fitful hand-to-mouth existence according as it happens to provide popular entertainment, and it is judged and rewarded almost entirely on that level.



Suppose that the English and American nations suddenly lost their taste for musical comedy and developed a passion for the game of ninepins. And suppose the rage became so great that all our fashionable theatres were turned into bowling-alleys. Suppose the confusion of ideas on the subject of ninepins and the drama was as great as that which now exists on the subject of musical comedy and the drama. A lover of the drama might have no objection to ninepins, might indeed be a lover of the game; but, if the drama were threatened with extinction on account of the rage, he would surely be right to urge: "There is nothing criminal in your love for ninepins, but it is not the drama; in your rage to spend an empty evening and amuse yourself, you are killing a fine art."

It is not entirely the fault of the public. Doubtless, some of the fault must rest upon the dramatists. Why don't we turn out a succession of masterpieces? In reply to this, I have to urge a fact that is scarcely suspected by either playgoers or critics—yet a fact that governs the whole art or business of playwriting. A dramatic author is mainly conditioned in his choice and treatment of subjects and themes by the possibility of getting them adequately played and adequately stage-managed at a theatre of repute. When a play is wrongly or inadequately represented, it is always the author who is held responsible. Now, it is useless to blame actors or managers for the state of things which, if it has not entirely killed serious dramatic art in England, has completely paralyzed it. The fault is our present system. It is almost hopeless under our present system to write plays of great passion or serious intellectual import. In the region of mere drawing-room comedy, in the reproduction of certain little aspects of daily life, we have attained a high degree of perfection. We have in England a number of actors and actresses who can faithfully copy the behavior of average persons in ordinary moments and situations, and the small mannerisms and habits of their different classes. We have a few very gifted actors and actresses who can do more than this; but many of our leading actors and actresses are woefully deficient in the technique of their art; some of them are barely acquainted with the rudiments of elocution; the best of them are scarcely on a level in this respect with the average members of a municipal theatre in France. So that, alike for the adequate representation of Shake-

speare and of our classical comedies, and for the adequate representation of any play of modern life that tries to deal in a great way with great emotions, great phases of our present civilization, or great intellectual ideas—alike for these two classes of play we have no trained body of actors ready to interpret an author in such a way that the public may get at his meaning. Nor have we a trained body of playgoers ready to appreciate and respond to the author and actors.

I hope from my arguments that it will be clear that it is desirable to have a national drama. It is also desirable for us to set about its organization in earnest. Let me state what the English and American people must do if they wish to have a national drama:

1. To distinguish and separate our drama from popular amusement; to affirm and reaffirm that popular amusement and the art of the drama are totally different things; and that there is a higher and greater pleasure to be obtained from the drama than from popular amusement.

2. To found a national or *répertoire* theatre where high and severe literary and artistic standards may be set; where great traditions may be gradually established and maintained amongst authors, actors, critics and audiences.

3. To insure so far as possible that the dramatist shall be recognized and rewarded when and in so far as he has painted life and character, and not when and in so far as he has merely tickled and amused the populace.

4. To bring our acted drama again into living relation with English literature; to dissolve the foolish prejudice and contempt that literature now shows for the acted drama; to win from literature the avowal that the drama is the most live, the most subtle, the most difficult form of literature; to beg that plays shall be read and judged by literary men who are also judges of the acted drama. To bring about a general habit of reading plays such as prevails in France.

5. To inform our drama with a broad, sane, and profound morality; a morality that neither dreads, nor wishes to escape from, the permanent facts of human life and the permanent passions of men and women; a morality akin to the morality of the Bible and of Shakespeare; a morality equally apart from the morality that is practised amongst wax dolls and from the moral-

ity that allows the present sniggering, veiled indecencies of popular farce and musical comedy.

6. To give our actors and actresses a constant and thorough training in widely varied characters, and in the difficult and intricate technique of their art; so that in place of our present crowd of intelligent amateurs, we may have a large body of competent artists to interpret and vitalize great characters and great emotions in such a way as to render them credible, and interesting, and satisfying to the public.

7. To break down so far as possible, and at any rate in some theatres, the present system of long runs with its attendant ill effects on our performers; to establish throughout the country *répertoire* theatres and companies, to the end that the actors may get constant practice in different parts; and to the end that the author may see his play interpreted by different companies and in different ways.

8. To distinguish between the play that has failed because it has been inadequately or unsuitably interpreted, and the play that has failed on its own demerits; to distinguish between the play that has failed from the low aims or mistaken workmanship of the playwright, and the play that has failed from the low tastes of the public, or from the mistakes of casting or production.

9. To bring the drama into relation with the other arts; to cut it asunder from all flaring advertisements, and big capital letters, and from all tawdry and trumpery accessories; to establish it as a fine art.

It will be noticed that many of these proposals overlap and include each other. Virtually, they are all contained in the one pressing necessity for our drama that it shall be recognized as something distinct from popular amusement. And this one pressing necessity can be best and most effectually met by the fostering of the drama as a national art in a national theatre. If such a theatre should be established and endowed, either by the Government or by private gift, I would very gladly offer it a new play without any consideration of fees whatever.

HENRY ARTHUR JONES.